



AUTHOR'S ROLE IN PRODUCTION OF BETTER BOOKS

—NILIMA SINHA*

"Oh, a children's author?"

"Achcha, you write for children . . .
Kutte billi ki kahaniyan?"

A laugh. The eyes turn away. The voice becomes disinterested. A few more polite questions, a remark or two, and the speaker walks off to seek company more important. Someone who writes for children is a person of not much consequence and hardly worth wasting time over.

This is the general attitude of people towards a subject which should be of vital interest to all who care for the future.

Childhood is the stage in life when man is most receptive. I still remember the lines of a poem that I read and liked as a child. They are too deeply embedded in my mind to be ever forgotten. The books I read then are the ones I still treasure. Whatever a child sees, hears or reads remains

in his conscious or subconscious mind for almost the rest of his life. Is it not absolutely imperative, therefore, that we present the best before him at this crucial time in his life?

Today, the media play a more and more significant role in the life of our children. If we care for them, we must understand and remain aware of the tremendous influence and effect of media on susceptible minds.

Whatever be the medium—whether electronic or print—the basic idea behind its production is supplied by the author. He is the creator who provides the foundation around which the whole media edifice is built. Unless the original creation is really worthwhile, success of the end product cannot be ensured. A book may be well designed and illustrated. But it has to have

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good contents to satisfy the reader. Behind every successful film is the hand of the person who wrote its story. The role of the author in *any* media production—book, play, or film—is too crucial to be ignored.

Those who write for children have a much more significant role to play than those who write merely for adults. I will repeat the word 'merely', for I would like to emphasise the fact that writing for the young is a far more important task than writing for adults. The children's author not only entertains, he also develops attitudes, shapes personalities and introduces values in children's minds. He thus shapes the future of a whole nation.

QUALITIES OF A CHILDREN'S AUTHOR

Writing for children is a very specialised art. Not everyone has the capacity, nor the inclination to write for the young. Unlike those who write for adults, a children's author must submerge his own identity and control his urges, for he has to be careful about the effect his writing has on the immature reader. He cannot afford to hurt the sensitivities of a tender mind. A writer for children has to catch and hold the attention of a restless and active young person who would rather play or jump around than sit or concentrate. His style must be pleasant rather than one which is rich, but grim. He must have the ability to shed his adult inhibitions and sense of superiority so that he can enter the imaginative world of the child. Only then will he be able to communicate with his readers. At the same time, he has to remember that his role is not just of an entertainer. He is also an educator, a psychiatrist, a guide for young minds. He must present facts without trying to teach, give values without seeming to preach, and provide guidance without imposing. He must constantly strive for excellence, for today's child is nobody's fool. Anything wrong,

false or smacking of hypocrisy would be immediately discarded by the discerning young reader.

Those who do possess this rare knack, this talent for catching the attention of the young, must come out of their shells. They must step forward, for they have an important role to play in the development of society. By creating good, wholesome and entertaining literature for children, they would contribute a major share in the progress of the nation. Though publishers are still hesitant to produce more books for children and film producers reluctant to invest in good children's films, there is no denying the fact that there is an enormous gap between the felt need and the available supply. All those who care for children must shake off their apathy and try to fill this gap. Along with the need for food and clothing, there is also the need for food for the mind, the intellect and the heart. Authors must gird up their loins to provide the literary and cultural nourishment which young intellects require as much as anything else.

The need is to create literature which would endure and grip the imagination of the young, to produce work which would inspire not only this generation but many other generations to come. The need is to produce characters which every Indian child will love and try to emulate. We have epic heroes such as Krishna, Hanuman and Arjun. But what about heroes to satisfy the modern child? We have Phantom, there is Superman, there are the five Findouters and there is Nancy Drew. But what about indigenous heroes from our own milieu? Besides Satyajit Ray's Prof. Sonku and Bhagwat's Faster Fene, there are very few great figures in the fiction world to inspire children. Should we allow our kids to feel that great men are born only in the West? What about lovable characters like Noddy, Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse? Should such

cuddly characters emerge only from Europe and America? Is it not time we had more cute little creatures of our own—like Chitku, Cheeky-Meeky and Havaladar Oopi?

To create adventure as exciting as *Treasure Island*, fantasy as eternal as *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and characters as delightful as those in *Winnie the Pooh* must be the aim of every author. Not to imitate Western classics or produce imitation Enid Blyton mysteries, but to create something wholly Indian and entirely original which could strike a chord in our children's minds—this is what we must strive for. A book of lasting value rather than quick and cheap literature (of which there is plenty available to spoil the taste) is what is required from those who can write for children. The rational mind of the reader today wants more than the old traditional folk tale and mythology. It requires science-based stories, school stories, mystery and adventure, humour, historical fiction, stories based on social problems faced by today's child, and much more. Plays, short stories, poems and songs, novels, films scripts—the scope is endless. The requirements of every age, class, culture, group and level of readership must be met.

ELECTRONIC VS PRINT MEDIA

The fear has often been expressed that the electronic media will soon overtake the print media. I feel it is unjustified. A book has definite advantages, for pleasure can be derived from it repeatedly by turning its pages over and over again to savour the words. A book allows its reader to enter the world of thoughts and ideas. It gives free reign to a child's imagination and stimulates the thought process, whereas TV-viewing may turn him into an unthinking, dull and passive watcher. Not only this, according to a survey conducted recently, the printed word left a much more lasting effect on the mind than the

fleeting picture from a film. The role of the book in a child's learning process is much greater, and therefore, the need for the written word is sure to remain.

As literacy grows, the reading habit must be introduced along side to help sustain it. If the child is to be prevented from slipping back into the darkness of illiteracy, he must be given books to read. A text book may not be enough. Sometimes, a text book may be looked at with fear and awe by a child, for, it is connected with school, strict teachers, homework and other scary things! The book I talk about is the one which a child reads solely for the pleasure that it gives. It is this book which would reach his heart and create an impact. It is this book, read for the sheer pleasure of it, which will impart knowledge and values most easily and effectively. It must be the aim, not just of authors, but of all those concerned with the quality of a people, to put such books in the hands of *every literate child* in the country.

Authors may play their role and attempt to produce good literature. But what use is a masterpiece unless it reaches its target audience? It is here that the roles of others assume importance. Unless they create a proper environment for authors to work in, unless they encourage and help, children's authors may as well lay down their pens, for obviously, society does not envisage any role for them.

I spoke to several authors on the subject to get their views and reactions. All felt the same way, and on their behalf, I would like to draw attention to the problems they have to face.

PROBLEMS FACED BY AUTHORS

Need for Respect—Far from being valued and appreciated for his rare talent which enables him to write for children, such a writer is considered somewhat of a lesser being than the exalted one who writes for

adults. This attitude must be changed. Children's writing must be treated with as much respect as any other profession. It is not just a pastime, nor a hobby indulged in by housewives with time on their hands. Those in the profession must be recognised as skilled artists engaged in a special career, and treated as such. The time and effort of these authors have as much value as of any other professional. Due respect is essential to encourage talented writers to enter and continue in the field of children's literature. Of course, it has to work both ways. Authors too must play their role by working as professionals. Deadlines must be kept and excellence in work assured.

Help from Government—It is time the Government realised the importance of the author's role in children's media. If courses can be run on subjects such as fashion designing, interior decoration and advertising, why not on this subject which is of such vital importance to us? Many more publishers should be encouraged to produce children's books by reducing the cost of paper or by giving subsidies, or through large scale buying and distribution of books by government agencies, as in the case of Operation Blackboard.

Media Encouragement—Media attention is lavishly showered when a book for adults is released. If it is possible for an Upamanyu Chatterjee or an Amitava Ghosh to shine on our literary horizon, why cannot a children's author acquire a similar halo? It is not as if good books have not been published for children. Books by the Children's Book Trust are excellent both from the production as well as from the content point of view. But apart from a few reviews tucked away somewhere in a corner of a daily newspaper, they do not receive any attention. Books by foreign authors of children's books do succeed in evoking response but a book by an Indian author does not. Educators and others in-

terested in children could help by releasing children's books with the same fanfare that a book on another subject gets.

Publishers must recognise the importance of the author's role in producing quality literature for children. They spend so much on wrapping and packaging that they forget the contents must be good too. No amount of beautifying or decorating would make up for a bad story. Designers and illustrators may demand their price and get it too. But when the author's turn comes, publishers always mention production costs and overhead expenditures. It must be remembered that a good work of fiction, if properly written, takes at least a year of intense effort, mental activity and the tension of creation, to complete. Non-fiction work similarly requires much effort, and long hours are spent in research before a worthwhile manuscript is produced. Compensation should be adequate enough to cover the period. But for a few honourable exceptions, most publishers, specially of regional language books, give to the writers amounts that are an insult to the profession. No wonder the author tries to produce work at double speed. Quality suffers as a result. Some publishers, recognising the difficulties faced by the authors, have come forward on their own and offered advance payments to those engaged in assignments which require research. They have also offered better remuneration. We appreciate the efforts of publishers such as Ratna Sagar who have set an example and shown the way.

The amount paid to the writer who creates the story idea for a film is also a pittance compared to the sum lavished on the complete production. If other artists and technicians have to be paid well, why not the person who contributed the vital story idea?

Low or inadequate remuneration shows lack of respect and lowers the dignity of the children's author. Over the years,

prices of almost all commodities have increased. Salaries of all government and non-government employees increase as the rate of inflation soars up. The poor author continues to receive payments at the same old rates. He spends hours hunched over his typewriter, but gets little in return. One reason for this may be the fact that most publishers consider children's writing to be something indulged in as a hobby or a part-time job rather than as a career.

There is an urgent need to change this attitude. A way must be found to provide better remuneration to authors of children's books. Otherwise quality of their work is bound to suffer.

Another area where thinking is required is where copyright laws are concerned. With the emergence of the electronic media, it is necessary to ensure that the author does not lose all his rights when he signs on the dotted line for the print medium. For other media such as audio and audio-visual he should be paid separately in case his work is used. Authors and publishers could put their heads together to think about it and work out a fair solution.

Often, the author is made to play the secondary role of a supplicant as far as the publisher is concerned. To a sensitive person (and most authors are sensitive, or they would not have taken to writing!) it becomes a humiliating experience at times to deal with the publisher. Long delays in responding to manuscripts, rejection without being given any reason, and arbitrary decisions about printing of books are other frustrating experiences related by the author. Courtesy, consideration and understanding of the author's problems will definitely make for better relationship.

A publisher can help an author to improve and develop by supplying him with information about market surveys, reader response, and book sales. Publicity efforts and contact with readers help boost the

morale of the writer, and inspire him to scale new heights of excellence. To a creative writer, affection from fans and appreciation of efforts are sometimes even more valuable than money! Reader-author meetings, as shown in one of the AWIC sessions, proved most useful and could be arranged by publishers.

Today, a book is not known for its writer so much as for the publisher. Often the author's name is not displayed on the cover at all. In the electronic media it is more often than not missing from the credits. Is this fair to the person who created the original work? Such disregard of the writer's work can be most frustrating. It is in total contrast to the Western world where a book often sells only for its author's name. All books must bear the writer's name not only on the cover but on the spine as well. Films and serials should show the name prominently in the credits.

At this juncture, I would like to appeal to writers to stick together and resist unfair practices and exploitation as far as possible. In unity lies strength. Associations of writers can do a lot in this matter by taking up cases where injustice has been done.

A healthy relationship between the editor and the author would help to promote the quality of books. A writer is apt to indulge in flights of literary fancy. He would like the editor to polish his work without changing the style of writing. Encouragement, inspiration and suggestions from him would be useful and most welcome. Especially, a new writer needs help and guidance rather than criticism or harshness, to bloom in the hands of a friendly editor.

To minimise waste of effort, it would be useful if the author is made aware of the publisher's requirements. Hit or miss methods, and aiming in the dark mean unnecessary labour for both the editor and the author. Since there are not that

many writers for children, it could be avoided by keeping the author informed of subjects on which books are planned. Books that have been rejected, specially long fiction or much researched non-fiction, should be retrieved as far as possible to avoid waste of labour. Possibility of rewriting should be explored provided there is scope.

Earlier, I mentioned the need for creating characters in children's literature. Here I would like to say that the help of publishers and editors is required to enable authors to do this. What the *Target* (an English magazine for children) has done to encourage the development of Moomin, other publishers may do for their own books and heroes. Several novels woven around characters that have proved popular with children may be produced to make those characters emerge. Books liked by children could be reprinted again and again to give them the chance to turn into enduring literature and emerge as classics.

Unless the packaging is attractive, the author's masterpiece may never reach the target audience. He has as much stake in the success of the product as the publisher or the producer in the case of a film. Is it not justified if he wants to have his say in production decisions? Authenticity of a film or of illustrations in a book would only increase with the involvement of the author, so please, publishers and producers, do keep the author in the picture.

I hope the suggestions I have given for the production of better books are taken in the right spirit. The intention is only to

help others create an atmosphere where a children's author can work without fear, tension or insecurity to produce his best for our children. These points have been collected after talking to several authors, both old and new. The problems faced by those in this field are numerous and daunting. No wonder, it is only the very dedicated who stay on to struggle. Hats off to all those who, in spite of low remuneration, humiliation and lack of recognition still continue to write for children!

Creation of better books as well as better media is an urgent need today. With our children exposed to strong doses of the electronic media, it is even more important that the right kind of creative ideas are produced for them. Good authors must come up. The future of the nation is at stake. To help create better personalities, better literature must be made available for children's media.

Literature is a part of a nation's culture and wealth. We cannot afford to neglect those who enrich our heritage. We have paid homage to great litterateurs such as Premchand and Mahadevi Verma. But is it not time now to honour and respect those who have the added responsibility of moulding the characters of the young?

If we want the next generation to be better citizens, if we want nations to progress and prosper, we must not neglect those in whose hands children's media rest—the author who writes specially for children. It is time we made efforts to give him the three Rs — Respect, Recognition and Remuneration.

Writers and artists are creative thinkers and thinkers are loners.